2
Contemporary Victorian(ism)s

> The jumble brick and stone of the city's landscape is a medley of style in which centuries and decades rub shoulders in a disorder that denies the sequence of time …
>
> (Penelope Lively, *City of the Mind*, 1991)

> the Victorians have been made and remade throughout the twentieth century, as successive generations have used the Victorian past in order to locate themselves in the present.
>
> (Miles Taylor, Introduction to *The Victorians since 1901,* 2004)

Even in the twenty-first century we inhabit Victorian urban space. The streets and buildings are a palimpsest, but these reinscriptions never effect the full erasure of the past and this, at times, produces a 'shock of recognition' (Himmelfarb, 1995: 15–16). The past exists in the present in the shape of buildings and urban spaces and in residual customs, beliefs, institutions and practices. Since the spatial distance between the present and the past is negligible, this can sometimes make the past seem close, as though very little separates it from the present at all. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, for much of the twentieth century and, at times, today, the Victorians and their culture have been characterised in terms of their absolute otherness. Rather than the shock of recognition we experience the terror (and sometimes pleasure) of alterity, the fright (and satisfaction) of estrangement. We feel keenly, and assert strongly, our indomitable distance from the Victorians.

K. Mitchell, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction*

Simon Joyce argues that the term 'Victorian' came into use almost immediately upon the Queen's death in 1901, coined by journalists who desired to 'summarize her reign, the century with which she seemed synonymous, or both (Joyce, 2002: 7). However, Miles Taylor notes that the term has been dated to 1851 and suggests that 'certainly by the Jubilee years of 1887 and 1897 it was being used to describe a distinct historical era, with its own poetry, literature and song, military heroes, drama, graphic art, dress and fashion' (Taylor, 2004: 3). This suggests something of the slipperiness of the term, the difficulty of defining the 'Victorian'. It is a term that, since Victoria's death, has accumulated multifarious and often contradictory meanings and which often colonises the several decades both before and after her reign. In their introduction to *Victorian Afterlife,* John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff appear to use the term 'Victorian' interchangeably with 'nineteenth century'. This may be, in part, because they wish to argue for what might be called a 'long Victorian' era, suggesting that the contemporary obsession with this period includes the adaptations of E. M. Forster and Jane Austen novels by filmmakers like Merchant and Ivory, Iain Softley, Ang Lee and Patricia Rozema since these '[project] a "Victorian feel" into Regency and early high-modern texts alike' (Kucich and Sadoff, 2000: x, xi). In keeping with this periodisation, in *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), David Lowenthal defines the Victorian period as beginning after 1815, asserting that 'the end of the Napoleonic Wars marks a more significant divide than the accession of Victoria' (Lowenthal, 1985: 96).

Writing in 1993, Robin Gilmour draws together the multifarious attitudes with which the Victorian era has been treated throughout the twentieth century, claiming that '[we] look back to our Victorian ancestors with conflicting feelings of envy, resentment, reproach, and nostalgia' (Gilmour, 1993: 1). The fusion of proximity and distance, recognition and unfamiliarity, is manifest in the diverse, and often contradictory, images the era evokes in the contemporary imagination. As Gilmour argues, we still live in the long shadow cast by the nineteenth century, 'in the aftermath of that powerful and seemingly assured civilisation' (Gilmour, 1993: 1) and for us, the term 'Victorian' is dense with signification. It conjures up conflicting images of large, richly decorated drawing rooms and narrow lanes of decrepit slums; tightly laced corsets and dens of ill repute; the thrusting grandeur of empire and the oppression and subjugation of 'savages'. It may even evoke 'images of piano legs modestly sheathed in pantaloons, table legs (as well as human legs) referred to as "limbs," and books by men and women

authors dwelling chastely on separate shelves in country-house libraries' (Himmelfarb, 1995: 15–16).[1] The images are diverse and incongruous. Yet the diversity of characterisations of an era spanning some sixty years can hardly be surprising, and perhaps the period is best understood in terms of its contradictions and discrepancies. The difficulty is not to discover which of these images truly represents the Victorian era but to determine which images have prevailed when and to what purposes. As the prevalence of the period in contemporary fiction, film, television, fashion, home furnishings and collectibles suggests, the Victorians continue to have meaning for us today. The question is *what kind* of meaning does it have and how is this affected by the various ways in which the era is represented across a range of media today?

Characterisations of a period are influenced by artistic endeavours and trends in scholarship, by political concerns and by the philosophy of history and historiography that dominates at a given time. As I have argued in the previous chapter, these memorial practices shape Victorian culture and ensure that it shapes our own. If we can understand these practices as 'acts in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past' (Hirsch and Smith, 2002: 5), we recognise that since the death of Queen Victoria, a variety of attitudes toward the past has impacted the way we have shaped the Victorians and our relationship to them; attitudes ranging from repudiation and disavowal to condescension and affection. Such is the ubiquity and vigour of the contemporary return to things Victorian that John Kucich and Dianne Sadoff suggest that we 'fixat[e] on the nineteenth-century past as the specific site … in which the present imagines itself to have been born and history forever changed'. For them, the postmodern might better be characterised as the post-Victorian, 'a term that conveys the paradoxes of historical continuity and disruption' (Kucich and Sadoff, 2000: x, xiii). In the same volume Nancy Armstrong presents the Victorian period as a nascent form of sociocultural postmodernity. Or, more to the point, postmodernism becomes here, 'an extension of Victorian culture' (Armstrong, 2000: 313).[2] And Christine L. Krueger, in another collection of essays about the deployment of the 'Victorian' in contemporary culture uses the term 'post-Victorian' to suggest, and then negate, our postmodernity. She argues that 'no matter how vociferously we protest our postmodern condition, we are in many respects post-Victorians, with a complex relationship to the ethics, politics, psychology, and art of our eminent – and obscure – Victorian precursors' (Krueger, 2002: xi). This chapter examines some of the evocations of the Victorian era throughout the

twentieth century, in the work of literary critics and historians, and in the rhetoric of politicians, many of whom have attempted to fix a stable identity for the period in order to compare or contrast it with our own.[3] Here and in my discussion of neo-Victorian fiction I am not concerned with judging the appropriation of 'Victorian' according to a set of traits defined as 'Victorian', to determine how faithful, or otherwise, they are to the period. Rather, my interest lies in exploring which characteristics, of people, place and period, are depicted as Victorian in these novels, and to what ends. Thus, I follow John McGowan in his assertion that 'the Victorians as a group characterized by certain shared features do not exist except insofar as they are produced in that similarity by a discourse that has aims on its audience' (McGowan, 2000: 23).

I

Like C. P. Snow, whose rejection of the Victorian period I quoted in the Introduction, many early-twentieth century writers characterised the Victorians in terms of their difference and distance. The Victorian period quickly came to signify the very opposite of modernity: 'in the early years of this century no self-respecting literary or artistic modernist or political liberal would wish to think of him or herself as the child of repression, realism, materialism and *laissez-faire* capitalism' (Bullen, 1997: 1–2). Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis and F. T. Marinetti all repudiated the influence of the Victorians in order to mark out the distinctiveness of their own, 'modernist' writing. Targeting mid-Victorian writers, they conducted what Taylor describes as an 'onslaught against what they saw as the excessive moralism of George Eliot, the journalistic style of Charles Dickens, the insincerity of William Thackeray and the melancholia of Alfred Tennyson' (Taylor, 2004: 4). This anti-Victorian sentiment is perhaps most clearly embodied in Lytton Strachey's iconoclastic *Eminent Victorians* (1918). In contrast to the Victorian tradition of hagiographical, expansive biography, these four, short biographies reinterpreted their prominent Victorian subjects, focusing on character flaws, anxieties and inconsistencies. This early anti-Victorian reaction was exacerbated by economic catastrophe in the 1930s. As Taylor argues, 'unemployment opened up a further gulf between Victorian materialism on the one hand and breadline Britain on the other' (Taylor, 2004: 5).

However, against the notion of a wholesale rejection of the period, Guy Barefoot's study of 1930s screen and stage productions of the Victorian plays *Gas Light* and *East Lynne*, traces a tension, in these productions

and their reception, between nostalgia for the period and a rejection of its 'tastelessness, bad art and paraphernalia, misogyny and poverty' (Barefoot, 1994: 101). Amidst the dismissal of the era, and contrary to it, was also a rather condescending attitude toward the era as quaint and charming, 'an explicitly gendered, popular notion of the Victorian that could be contrasted with modern functionalism or austerity' (ibid.: 102). This ambivalence toward the Victorian era was caught up in a growing uneasiness about modernity and its achievements in the wake of war and economic depression. Studies such as G. M. Young's *Portrait of an Age* (1936) made some effort to reassess the Victorian period and to cast off some of the negativity associated with it, but it was not until after the Second World War that a new fascination with the period achieved prevalence.

By the end of the Second World War commentators noted a marked increase of interest in the period in both England and America (House, 1955: 78). Writing in 1948 Humphrey House cites the illustrated articles about the Victorians featured in *Picture Post* and *Illustrated*, the BBC Programmes 'Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians' and also the talks on the Third Programme and the Home Service as evidence of this new fascination. These and other articles and programmes often explored aspects of Victorian art and architecture that had been unobserved or disregarded (ibid.). House also notes a return to the Victorians in publishing and book purchasing trends, with George Eliot and Alfred Lord Tennyson achieving a certain currency again. Exhibitions mounted by the Victoria and Albert Museum to mark the centenaries of the Great Exhibition (1951) and the opening of the Museum itself (1952) prompted renewed interest in Victorian decorative arts. These exhibitions helped to cast off the idea that Victorian decorative arts were not 'merely unfashionable' but actually 'an immoral monstrosity', establishing them rather as objects worthy of scholarly study (Burton, 2004: 121, 133). However, Anthony Burton notes that '[s]ome of the revivalists took up Victorian art just because it was naughty, while a good deal of the motive power of the revival ... was fuelled by *disapproval* of Victorian art, rather than *liking* for it' (ibid.: 123) so that the revival of Victorian arts provided curios rather than objects of admiration.

The treatment of the era as a curiosity was fostered by the historiographical belief that the past could be researched and discovered once the passing of time provided sufficient distance for objectivity to be attained. This allowed mid-century historians, and the public who took an interest, to feel they could grasp the Victorians and understand them.

Thus, in an introductory talk broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1949 G. M. Trevelyan's remarked:

> the BBC has chosen the time for this series well. The period of reaction against the nineteenth century is over; the era of dispassionate historical valuation of it has begun. We can by this time examine without prejudice what we have inherited from the Victorians, what we have improved away, and what we have lost. (Trevelyan, 1949: 15)

With the passing of nearly fifty years sufficient for producing critical distance, the Victorians were then harnessed within the bounds of these 'dispassionate valuations', studies in which they were described in categorical detail under headings such as 'Doubt', 'Art', 'Science' and so on. These neat labels and descriptions meant that the Victorian era and its influence could be controlled and contained and they perpetuated the sense of 'otherness'. Bullen observes that this approach to the Victorian past 'was interesting and comforting, but it made the nineteenth century seem very remote' (Bullen, 1997: 3). House demonstrates this sort of attitude which allows for an interest in the Victorians whilst ensuring that they and their culture remain quaint, oddities, their features and concerns not taken too seriously:

> one may possess and even collect typically interesting Victorian objects without being seriously involved in any major errors of judgment: but there is a real risk that what may seem at first just an 'amusing' fashion (that word has been current in this context on and off for nearly thirty years) may by various means, and even by the disproportionate influence of a few individuals, develop into something more through the failure of alertness and discrimination. (House, 1955: 80)

He urges the use of critical discrimination to prevent a useless, and even dangerous, return to things Victorian, a return characterised, he feels, by a mood of unhealthy nostalgia. He quotes Professor Basil Willey's observation of just such a mood as a response to the war that had just ended. In his talk for the Third Programme Willey contrasted the 'debunking' of the Victorian period after the First World War with the current mood in 1948, when 'we are deferring to it, and even yearning after it nostalgically'. Pointing to the increased demand for Victorian novels and volumes of essays and poetry, he observes: 'In our own unpleasant century we are all displaced persons, and some

of us feel tempted to take flight into the nineteenth as into a promised land, and settle there like illegal immigrants for the rest of our lives' (Willey qtd. in ibid.: 83). Whereas early in the century denigrating the Victorians had been a means through which to delineate and praise modernity, by mid-century, in comparison with the Victorian era, the twentieth-century present no longer came off favourably. This was in part due to disenchantment with a modernity that had facilitated two world wars and economic depression. It was also due to a new phase in the representation of the Victorian period by historians and critics.

Shifts in literary and historical theories, methods and interests had coalesced so that Victorian culture had begun to seem more vivid and interesting, more diverse and less straight-laced than had hitherto been imagined. A suspicion grew, Bullen argues, 'that Victorian life was richer, more diverse, and less homogenous than had been supposed, and that gigantic monster called Victorian culture was coming into being'. The intellectual life of the century was rediscovered and 'to the handful of eminent Victorians were added … the philosophers, the scientists, the reformers, the theologians, the politicians, together with the sprawling mass of nineteenth-century art and literature in all its popular and esoteric forms' (Bullen, 1997: 3).

Studies focused upon intellectual and 'high' culture. This concentration, whilst reflecting the Arnoldian academic and artistic values of the era itself, also served to distance the Victorians from an increasingly populist culture by the 1960s. It was not until that decade and afterwards that the intervention of the discourses of feminism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and materialism all contributed to new representations of the Victorian era, representations that moved away from discussions only of high culture and included features previously invisible or excluded: women, the working and criminal classes and non-Europeans, for example (see ibid.: 6). As the title of Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians* (1964) suggests, his investigation into pornographic literature opened up an underside of Victorian culture, one that he argued was relegated to the margins both during the period and by twentieth-century Victorian studies. Part of his professed aim was to contribute to restoring the Victorians 'for the first time to their full historical dimensions' (Marcus, 1966: xix). His concept of the 'other Victorians' is built upon the idea of a hidden, silent and repressed sexuality, rendered mute and invisible to history by societal inhibitions and prohibitions. As his and others' scholarship opened new aspects of the Victorian era to scrutiny, twentieth-century notions of the period were necessarily revised and

the Victorian era became increasingly identified with sexuality and, more specifically, with its repression.

As Michel Foucault has argued, this narrative of Victorian repression is a pervasive cultural myth that functions to cast the twentieth century in the role of enlightened liberator. For Foucault, histories such as Marcus's tell only part of the story. They participate in the promulgation and perpetuation of what he calls 'the repressive hypothesis', which holds that the Victorians' attitude toward sex and sexuality had been primarily characterised by repression, that sex was shrouded by silence, that it was *the* secret. Against the image of a repressive and oppressive silence, Foucault paints another picture, one that refuses Marcus' characterisation of sex relegated to the margins of society. According to Foucault's account, discourse about sex proliferated in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1976: 17). Whereas talk about sex may have been eradicated from 'the authorized vocabulary' and 'a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor was codified', some words were screened out, and new rules of propriety governed, at another level, there was 'a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward' (ibid.: 18). Not only did the restrictions mean that talk of sex was newly valorised *because* it was indecent, but new techniques for speaking about sex were also produced within and by religious, political and economic institutions. Whereas religious discourse spoke about it with the language of morality, Foucault argues, political and economic discourse deployed the vocabulary of rationality, 'in the form of analysis, stocktaking, classification and specification' (ibid.: 23–24). In each instance, sex became a public issue between the state and the individual and 'a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it' (ibid.: 26). Thus, Foucault argues that sex and sexual desire, far from being mute, was transformed by the Victorians into a different, indeed copious, discourse and that it is not the case that power operated primarily in a repressive capacity regarding sex.

Foucault acknowledges that by questioning the repressive hypothesis his argument 'not only runs counter to a well-accepted argument, it goes against the whole economy and all the discursive "interests" that underlie this argument' (ibid.: 8). It is these interests that he wishes to expose by posing new questions: 'why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?' (ibid). Or, why has the twentieth century created the cultural myth of repression?

One argument, suggests Foucault, is that conceptualising Victorian sexuality in this way enables the late twentieth century to cast itself as

heir to this repressive regime, but a rebellious one; to characterise itself as willing to 'speak out against the powers that be' and free sex from its cloak of silence: 'to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights' (ibid.: 7).

By casting doubt upon the repressive hypothesis Foucault not only postulates that it functioned as a tool with which the twentieth century could establish a particular identity for itself, but also drew attention to a range of Victorian practices and discourses that suggested that Victorian culture was less homogenous and more diverse than it had previously seemed. His scholarship helped to transform the popular images of Victorian culture and provide a fuller picture of the range of experiences constituted within it. The Victorians and their sexuality were credited with greater complexity than the repressive hypothesis' ascription of silence and prudishness had allowed. More broadly, Foucault's insights also enabled more complex ways of understanding how sexuality is produced in and by representation and different kinds of discursive practices.

The first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was published in French in 1976 and in the English translation in the USA and Canada in 1978. However, it was not published in England until 1979, making its emergence coincidental with Margaret Thatcher's election victory. The posthumous publication of the second and third volumes of Foucault's *History* in the mid to late eighties, as Thatcher entered her second and third terms of office, meant that his ruminations upon sexuality shared an historical moment with Thatcher's discoursing upon sex and family values. This historical moment was one in which political activism centred upon issues of sex and sexuality, fuelled by the furore surrounding the AIDS crisis, which the media, together with politicians influenced by the New Right, cast as a moral crisis.

II

The 1980s was not the only historical moment Foucault shared with Margaret Thatcher. They shared, too, a revisiting of the Victorian era, with Thatcher urging a return to 'Victorian values'.[4] However, her images of the era, and the agenda of sexual and cultural politics that they served, were diametrically opposed to Foucault's own. Whereas Foucault described the ways in which, since the nineteenth century, sexualities

are produced through discourse and labelled normal or deviant, Thatcher reasserted the traditional and naturalised boundaries between normalcy and deviancy, morality and perversity in her campaign for family values. This approach is encapsulated in the (in)famous Clause 28 of the Local Government Act (1986), passed during her third term of office, which sought to prevent local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality', particularly as a 'pretended family relationship' (qtd. in Weeks, 1991: 137). Thatcher's invocation of the Victorian era centred upon her particular re-creation of the Victorian family, with the heterosexual marriage relationship as the permissible locus for sexual activity.

Hers was a return to the type of vision of the Victorian era that the work of scholars like Foucault and Marcus had, since the 1960s, attempted to revise. Indeed, Tristram Hunt, in a 2001 article for *The Australian Financial Review*, explicitly links Thatcher's visions of Victorian England with those of Lytton Strachey as they appeared in *Eminent Victorians,* arguing that together they 'managed to gut the reputation of the Victorian era'. He suggests that Thatcher's 'fond reminiscences of her parsimonious grandmother condemned the 19th century to being considered a time of cloying evangelicalism, repression and illiberalism' (Hunt, 2001: 6). She produced such images of the Victorians as a rhetorical basis for her campaign of family values which was intended to counteract what she saw as the permissiveness that had grown during and since the 1960s. Once again the Victorian era was called upon to provide a contrast with the present and, as in the 1940s and 1950s, the Victorian era was the celebrated period.

Thatcher used the term 'Victorian values' as a measure against which to identify the social ills of her milieu – a regulated economy, welfare dependency and the decline of the family – and to advocate a return to *laissez faire* economics, to a reliance upon individual charity and to strong family discipline. This would, as Gary Day suggests, 'revive Britain's flagging fortunes and restore her place in the world' (Day, 1998: 1–2). She contrasted a corrupt present with an idyllic and highly romanticised past, characterised by stability and strength, constructing the Victorian period as all that was other to contemporary culture.

Thatcher's use of the Victorian period is characterised by an ahistorical nostalgia, in which the 'Victorian' floats free of its temporal location in the nineteenth century and simply stands in for a series of ideals. Raphael Samuel argues:

> The past here occupies an allegorical rather than temporal space. It is a testimony to the decline in manners and morals, a mirror to

> our failings, a measure of absence. It also answers to one of the most universal myths, which has both its left-wing and right-wing variants, the notion that once upon a time things were simpler and the people were at one with themselves. (Samuel, 1992: 18)

Thatcher's Victorian idyll was peopled with industrious, honest and morally upright citizens; hard-working artisans who rose slowly through diligence. The 'Victorian' values she extolled were those of thrift, charity, independence and hard work. In a much-quoted interview with Peter Allen she praised the upbringing she was given by a Victorian grandmother and used it to delineate Victorian values as she wished to exploit them:

> you were taught to work jolly hard, you were taught to improve yourself, you were taught self-reliance, you were taught to live within your income, you were taught that cleanliness is next to godliness, you were taught self-respect, you were taught always to give a hand to your neighbour, you were taught tremendous pride in your country, you were taught to be a good member of your community. (Thatcher, 1983b)

Arguing that Thatcher was highly selective in her invocation of 'Victorian values', Samuel contrasts the Victorian Britain of Thatcher's rhetoric with that described in the oral histories and accounts given by those of her generation and earlier. Rather than focusing upon frugality, hard work and discipline, these accounts emphasise a sense of joy, of fun and of community:

> in working-class accounts of the 'good old days', … it is the images of sociability that prevail – the sing-songs in the pubs, the funeral processions, the 'knees-up' street parties, the summer outings. The canvas is crowded with characters; street performers will sometimes get a page or two to themselves and there may be a whole chapter for Whitsun or Bank Holiday. Shopping is remembered for its cheapness … People are forever in and out of each other's houses… (Samuel, 1992: 18)

In these accounts, too, the Victorian era is celebrated in contrast to the present, and painted as an idyllic, simpler time. Yet Thatcher's Victorian idyll is very different to the Eden constructed by these oral histories. Her version, Samuel observes, is 'altogether more severe. Her lost Eden

is one where resources were scarce and careful husbandry was needed to ensure survival. She remembers her childhood not for its pleasures but for its lessons in application and self-control' (ibid.: 19). In its focus upon hard work, discipline and their rewards, argues Samuel, Thatcher's Victorian Britain is similar to that of Asa Briggs', 'one of the "new way" social historians who, by their scholarly work, prepared the way for the rehabilitation of Victorian Values'; for both it is the 'age of improvement' (ibid.: 22). Of course, the oral histories with which Samuel debunks Thatcher's image of Victorian Britain are also highly selective, for all that Samuel makes their status as recorded memories the pledge of their authenticity. The details in these oral histories might differ from those of Thatcher's, but in each the Victorian era represents a benchmark from which we have regressed. The period is marked in terms of difference, alterity.

In keeping with their temporal dislocation, Thatcher cast her Victorian values as universal and enduring, claiming that 'all of these things are Victorian values … They are also perennial values' (Thatcher, 1983b). In this move, as Samuel argues, 'Victorian Values thus passed from the real past of recorded history to timeless "tradition"' (Samuel, 1992: 18). This claim of universality only points to the significance that Thatcher did alight upon a specific piece of Britain's history for its cultural cache; she did not, primarily, promote the values as perennial but rather marketed them as Victorian. Writing in 1987, James Walvin argues:

> Few could deny that late Victorian Britain was one of the world's leading powers, at the peak of economic and imperial achievement. Britannia not only ruled the waves but she ruled vast tracts of the globe's surface, and her industries – pioneering and (as it seemed) unmatched – dominated the markets of the world. (Walvin, 1987: 4)

Rather paradoxically, since it functioned primarily to contrast the Victorian period with a disappointing present, to the extent that her rhetoric aligned Thatcher herself to the image of past industrial, military and economic success, it also suggested a tradition, or a lineage, for the kind of radical politics she was advocating. The Victorian era was at once the inverse of her 1980s present, and its heritage.

Yet if referencing Victorian values allowed her to fashion herself as a traditionalist, then behind that façade even a glimmer of real faith in the Victorian era and its achievements can hardly be discerned. Although she promoted frugality and thrift under the rubric of Victorian values, she did not attempt to curtail consumer credit and

household debt actually grew throughout the 1980s. Samuel argues that 'if her precepts had been taken seriously, the economy would have been in ruins … Frugality and thrift, in short, so far from staging a come-back during Mrs. Thatcher's period of office, all but disappeared' (ibid.: 22–3). While urging a return to Victorian values, Thatcher proceeded to wage war against Britain's traditional industries. Her rhetoric praised and upheld the traditional, but in practice she undertook a far-reaching program of modernisation (ibid.: 10–11). While praising the Victorians and advocating a return to 'their' values, she attacked such Victorian establishments as the public service ethic, the Universities, the Bar, the House of Lords and the Church of England, and she deregulated the City of London. Indeed, as Samuel suggests, even her use of the phrase itself alternated between positive and pejorative: 'Marxism, she liked to say, was a Victorian, or mid-Victorian ideology; and she criticised nineteenth-century paternalism as propounded by Disraeli as anachronistic' (ibid.: 9). Thus, Samuel argues that 'the rhetoric of Victorian Values could be seen as an example of what the post-modernists call "double coding" and sociologists "cognitive dissonance" – i.e of words which say one thing, while meaning another and camouflaging, or concealing, a third' (ibid.: 24). Thatcher's return to Victorian values was a political ploy that enabled her to appear to be protecting stability and tradition when in fact she sought change, transformation and the new. Behind the appearance of a staunch and inflexible traditionalist was a ruthless innovator and behind reference to 'Victorian values' was a programme for vast change.

Thus, Walvin attributes the appeal of Victorian values in Thatcher's Britain to their ephemeral quality. 'Victorian values', as espoused by Thatcher, was a purely rhetorical phenomenon which could metamorphose to include or exclude virtues as deemed desirable in a given situation. 'Roll[ing] easily from the tongue … It is an idea which has the virtue of defying easy definition, yet people have no trouble knowing exactly what it means. It is a concept which has been divorced from its historical roots, representing instead a simple code of good behaviour and decent ideals' (Walvin, 1987: 6). They functioned this way too for neoconservative historian Gertrude Himmelfarb who, though she eschews the term 'values' itself, also castigates the culture of late twentieth-century Britain by referencing its Victorian past. In contrast to the sanitised, romanticised view of the Victorian era tapped by Thatcher, Himmelfarb's valorisation of Victorian 'virtues' depends upon a characterisation of the period as an endless cycle of poverty, hunger, drudgery and misery; it is the moral strictures of the period that

provide a buffer for such experiences. Like Thatcher, she denounces the twentieth century for a regression in values and moral progress. In the Victorian era, she maintains, even if many people did not live the ideals they espoused, they at least still held ideals. She argues that today, we do not espouse any ideals, which is evident in the transmutation of the word 'virtues' into its contemporary corollary, 'values', which can be 'beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies – whatever an individual, group or society happen to value at any time, for any reason' (Himmelfarb, 1995: 11–12). In contrast to the Victorians, we appear relativistic, without recourse to the authoritative weight of virtues. In a 'relativistic' society, Himmelfarb argues, morals, virtues and judgements become only a matter of individual taste or opinion and do not form a firm foundation against which to measure cultural features or behaviour, undermining the confidence with which such judgements could, in any case, be made (ibid.: 11). Asserting our reluctance to speak in terms of moral absolutes, she produces the Victorian era, in contrast, as a time when 'moral principles and judgments were as much a part of social discourse as of private discourse, and as much a part of public policy as of personal life' (ibid.: 241). Invoking 'Victorian virtues' thus becomes an indispensable means of speaking with the language of morality in contemporary culture. The historian can intervene instructively, Himmelfarb suggests, 'to remind us of a time, not so long, ago, when all societies, liberal as well as conservative, affirmed values different from our own' (ibid.: 249). She charges history with the role of 'reminding us of our gains and losses – our considerable gains in material goods, political liberty, social mobility, racial and sexual equality – and our no less considerable losses in moral well-being' (ibid.: 253).

Himmelfarb's Victorian period is more securely tied to its temporal location and she is careful to present a more balanced account of the era than Thatcher's selectivity. Indeed, she catalogues the faults of the Victorian period, in terms of its 'social and sexual discriminations, class rigidities and political inequalities, autocratic men, submissive women, and overly disciplined children, constraints, restrictions, and abuses of all kinds' but goes on to suggest that 'there is also much [in the period] that might appeal to even a modern, liberated spirit … the importance of an ethos that does not denigrate or so thoroughly relativize values as to make them ineffectual and meaningless' (ibid.: 249–50).

Whether she is applauding the period's superior morality or deploring the abuses that somehow coexisted with this morality, as surely as Thatcher's, Himmelfarb's own return to the Victorian period is

predicated upon the assertion of absolute difference. Implicit is the idea that there is a break or rupture between present and the past that utterly divides the two, so that scarcely a mark remains, at the present time, of the attitudes, institutions, values and cultural features of the Victorian era. If vestigial remnants persist, they serve only to highlight our 'otherness' and, indeed, our inferiority. Our memories of the Victorians are, therefore, 'rather like an amputated limb that still seems to throb when the weather is bad' (ibid.: 221). For Himmelfarb as for Thatcher, to assert continuities between the Victorian era and contemporary culture would be to destabilise the images of total contrast and undermine its use as an 'other' against which our culture can be denigrated.

III

Culturally, Thatcher's appeal to Victorian values coincided with the boom of the 'heritage industry', a term coined by Robert Hewison to describe the expansion and convergence of a number of cultural institutions to remake the past as entertainment (see Hewison, 1987: 221). It coincided, too, with heated and protracted debates about the historical value of this industry. Indeed, John Gardiner argues that these debates were partly a response to Thatcher's call for a return to Victorian values, 'conflating her suspect use of history with the nostalgia they identified all around them' (Gardiner, 2004: 176). And Suzanne Keen suggests that against the backdrop of the economic slump of the Thatcher years 'an emphasis on a more positive past can seem a natural reflex, an understandable impulse of nostalgia, a calculated program on the part of conservative politicians, or a pernicious evasion of responsibility for the present and future' (Keen, 2001: 103). For the heritage industry is usually associated with the promotion of a celebratory narrative, focusing on elements of the past that the nation can cherish, defend and in which it may take pride. It is not focused on any one aspect of Britain's past; indeed, it has been roundly criticised by some scholars who argue that it promotes a generalised view of the past, in which the particularities of different eras are flattened. Here the specificities of recorded history become 'timeless tradition' (see Samuel, 1994: 139). Gardiner suggests that in some ways it makes no sense to talk about the Victorian period in relation to the heritage industry because here excitement attaches to 'atmosphere', the *frisson* of 'olden times', more than to 'conscious connection with a particular age'. He argues that '[a] stroll around any "Past Times" shop (the chain was founded in 1986) or the large gift shop at the Victoria and Albert Museum will confirm how

comfortably imitation Victoriana nestles alongside artefacts from other periods when it is being sold to the public' (Gardiner, 2004: 168).

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by a mania for collecting Victorian artefacts, fostered by the rehabilitation of Victoriana in the 1950s and 1960s (as the last generations of Victorians passed away and the second-hand market flooded with their jewellery, clothing and furniture (see Gardiner, 2004)) and boosted by an increasingly consumer-driven economy. Money from the National Trust was contributed to the restoration of privately owned Victorian terraces and mansions, elevating them to the status of 'period residences', in the name of preserving national heritage. 'Heritage' colours and styles became popular for home furnishings and soon became known as 'the Laura Ashley look', and open-air and industrial museums multiplied. All of these factors, as Samuel suggests, 'had the effect, so far as popular taste was concerned, of rehabilitating the notion of the Victorian and associating it not with squalor and grime, but on the contrary with goodness and beauty, purity and truth' (Samuel, 1992: 14).

This mania for original and replicated Victorian material culture has been associated with uncritical nostalgia for a past that never existed, as Miriam Bailin argues: 'Belonging to another time and to other circumstances, and thus ineluctably value-laden, they also have the talismanic power to evoke whatever we long for as if it were something we've lost … ' (Bailin, 2002: 44). Bailin contrasts our obsession with Victoriana to the Victorians' own mania for revivalism which she describes as being an adaptation of the old to new uses, with the emphasis being on the new object. Whereas they valued the new object created by the mixture of old and new, she suggests, 'the current mania for reproduction and revival is characterized by a reverent attachment to the past as aura and ideal' (ibid.). Her study of the magazines, newsletters and catalogues that purvey Victoriana suggests their dependence upon a nostalgic invocation of 'a gentler more romantic time' (ibid.: 38).[5]

For its detractors, the heritage industry generally is accused of being ahistorical, of cultivating a depthless desire for the generalised past with little interest in historical understanding; selective, nostalgic and depthless and, as such, is opposed to history. The lines of demarcation in the history-heritage debate thus fall similarly to those of other debates that animate this book, including the opposition of history and memory and, crucially, history and fiction. Keen argues that this debate evinces 'a hierarchy of values in which history (detached, scholarly, dispassionate, accurate) trumps heritage (nostalgic, dysfunctional, inexact)'.

However, just as historical fiction is sometimes privileged over history, sometimes, in a reversal of values, 'heritage (popular, inspiring, authentic, belonging to us all) outdoes history (academic, hyper-specialized, politically correct, irrelevant)' (Keen, 2001: 98).

The last two decades of the twentieth century also saw a shift in historians' construction of the Victorians, participating in and contributing to popular fascination. Like the attitude fostered by the heritage industry, their histories are flavoured by affection for the Victorians. However, an increasing number of historians rejected the characterisation of Victorian culture in terms of its difference and distance, focusing instead upon the connections between the Victorians and ourselves. Indeed, Kucich and Sadoff suggest that one reason for the preponderance of neo-Victorian engagements is the way in which Victorian culture appears in many respects to anticipate our own, 'providing multiple eligible sites for theorizing [cultural] emergence' (Kucich and Sadoff, 2000: xv). Historians Gary Day, Richard Gilmour, Nadine Holdsworth, Matthew Sweet and others highlight similarity more than difference, continuity more than rupture in constructing our relationship to the Victorian past. Their scholarship appears, in part, a response to the absolute alterity posited by politicians such as Thatcher and historians such as Himmelfarb. Sweet and Day, particularly, challenge the particular version of Victorian values promulgated by Thatcher. Day not only argues, along the same lines as Samuel, that Thatcher was necessarily selective in what she chose to represent as Victorian values (state intervention, he suggests, is as Victorian as *lassez faire*), but also that to speak of a 'return' to these values is erroneous: 'the idea of a return to Victorian values assumed that they have faded away into history, requiring a deliberate act to revive them. However, it is possible to argue that Victorian values have never ceased to be a shaping force throughout the twentieth century' (Day, 1998: 2; see also Sweet, 2001). In many ways, then, this approach appears absolutely opposed to that of Thatcher and Himmelfarb. Yet, it, too, makes the Victorians key figures for establishing our identity today. It is simply founded upon similarity instead of difference.

In her article 'Haven't I Seen You Somewhere Before?,' literary critic Nadine Holdsworth makes our consumer culture a product of the Victorian period, arguing that a 'preoccupation with style over substance and an emphasis on pleasure through visual excess is not the sole domain of the contemporary age. The Victorian era also heralded a demand for impressive visual spectacle which rejected the principle of utility … ' (Holdsworth, 1998: 197). Thomas Richards propounds

a similar argument in his *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (1990). He argues that the Great Exhibition of 1851 heralded the beginning of 'modern' perceptions of the commodity. Tracing the origins of advertising back into the Victorian period, he claims that it was with the Great Exhibition that the appetite for the spectacle began. He argues that at this event, designed to celebrate the dignity of production, the commodity 'came alive' and began to function in society apart from human agency as it is seen to do today. Prior to this time the commodity had been mundane, neutral, only itself, not symbolic. In the second half of the nineteenth century the commodity assumed the central significance it still has today and the cogs of capitalism, and a resultant consumer culture, had already begun to operate: 'In the short space of time between the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the First World War, the commodity became and has remained the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world' (Richards, 1990: 1). According to Richards, despite its not being held for profit, The Great Exhibition was also the point at which entrepreneurs realised that there was money to be made from representing the commodity. Advertising dominated in this commodity culture, and, as in contemporary culture, it colonised the body through an ever-multiplying number of therapeutic commodities which opened all of the body to marketing. 'The body had become the prevailing icon of commodity culture, and there was no turning back' (Richards, 1990: 205).

This assertion of continuities between Victorian visual culture and our own can be traced in a number of neo-Victorian novels that link the origins of photography to our own image-obsessed society. Examples of such novels include Lynne Truss' *Tennyson's Gift* (1996), Robert Solé's *The Photographer's Wife* (1999), Ross Gilfillan's *The Edge of the Crowd* (2001), Katie Roiphe's *Still She Haunts Me* (2001), Gail Jones' *Sixty Lights* (2004) and Susan Barrett's *Fixing Shadows* (2005). Fiona Shaw's novel, *The Sweetest Thing* (2003), explores the birth of the iconic image in the Victorian era, stemming from the introduction and popularisation of photography, and dramatises early uses of advertising in the Victorian period. Imitating the style and plot of Victorian sensation fiction, with echoes of Wilkie Collins' *Woman in White* in particular, the novel explores the creation and consumption of various types of images, comparing three ostensibly different types of photographic images: Samuel Ransome's collection of photographs of working-class women, which he keeps in albums in his room, Mr Benbow's pornographic photographs,

which are sold to the men who commission them, and the photographs William Ransome uses for his advertisements for cocoa and chocolates. Each of these images circulates and reproduces promiscuously, accruing meanings in excess of their original purpose. Their production and consumption are entwined with a burgeoning capitalism galvanised by the introduction of photography in advertising. William Ransome's rationale for using photographic images of Harriet to sell his chocolates appeals to an increasing public appetite for the visual, and for imagistic invocations of pleasure, instead of information in their consumer choices:

> my plan is a girl. Not an imaginary girl, but a real one. Not only a painted picture, but also a photograph. A real girl. If we put a girl on our boxes, we will sell them faster than we can imagine. She will become the Wetherby's girl and when people look at her, and she is pretty and pure and smiling, like someone they might like to know, they will think of us, and they will buy our cocoa (165) … [if] when you drank a glass of smooth cocoa, its froth catching in your beard, if you had one, its sweet warmth caressing your throat, you thought of the girl? Would not that be a clever thing? (234)

Here, the commodity, the tin of cocoa or box of chocolates, comes alive, symbolic of something else. The photograph of a girl stands in for the girl herself, becoming 'a girl on our boxes' (165), with the implication being that she is coeval with her image and that consumers will acquire her when they purchase the cocoa or chocolates. Throughout the novel the Victorian era is produced as the origin of our advertising practices and types of image-production and, ultimately, as the foundation for the consumer culture we inhabit today.

Gary Day, too, constructs our relationship to the Victorians in terms of continuity; that of Victorian values and of 'the Victorian condition itself: 'what we understand as modernity and postmodernity can simply be seen as different facets of Victorianism' (Day, 1998: 2). He argues that whereas Jürgen Habermas claimed that the division of substantive reason into science, morality and art, so that each becomes the domain of the expert to the exclusion of others, is characteristic of modernity, this is 'equally the feature of the Victorian period', in which the reform in universities and in technical education had led to increasing specialisation, undermining the 'synthesis' of knowledge (ibid.). And whereas Lyotard distinguished between modernity and postmodernity by identifying the use of metadiscourses to legitimate knowledge with the

former, and the suspicion of such metanarratives with the latter, Day argues that both attitudes were manifest in the Victorian era. He cites the legitmising importance of the metanarrative of human progress to the study of the natural world and to technological development on the one hand, and Walter Pater's claim that 'his age was distinguished from the ancient "by its cultivation of the 'relative' in place of the absolute",' on the other (ibid.). Similarly, Gilmour points to the 1870s Vernacular Revival as an example of this cultivation of the relative. The Revival, he claims, was 'part of a larger awakening to the virtues of regional life, of the homely and the local' that can be identified as a reaction to the accelerating change brought about by increasing industrialisation, urbanisation and mass production (Gilmour, 1993: 230). These changes transformed the Victorians' experience of everyday life in ways that can appear quite similar to the impact made by the technological advancements of postmodernity. Just as in contemporary culture the introduction of the information and development of web and web 2.0 technologies continues to transform communication and information systems at a rapid rate, the Victorians were witness to, and participants in, vast developments in their own communication structure. These included the building of an extensive railway system, the development of the efficient 'penny post' and the proliferation of newspapers and journals, all of which produced a saturation of information comparable, in its impact upon everyday life, to the technological developments that have transformed contemporary culture.

This, continuist, approach to constructing the relationship between the Victorians and ourselves is perhaps epitomised by the fascinating work of Matthew Sweet which, he claims, 'aims to expose the Victorianness of the world in which we live; to demonstrate that the nineteenth century is still out there, ready to be explored' (Sweet, 2001: xxii). His work 'liberates' the Victorians from the 'utterly false' stories about the period that have stood in place of the truth and argues that these have been perpetuated because we prefer to think of the Victorians as the 'figures against whom we have rebelled', and to suggest otherwise is to undermine one of the 'founding myths of modernity' (ibid.: 230–1). His study persuasively argues that there are connections between the Victorians and ourselves, that 'they built a world for us to live in' (ibid.). He writes poetically about the effect of continuing to live in Victorian urban spaces, suggesting that 'there are places where the Victorian past will rush to meet you', places that are 'luminous with a sense of the 1890s' (ibid.: 222). His is an engaging investigation of some lesser known Victorian figures, such as Blondin the acrobat, and offers alternative

approaches to features of the Victorian period that often receive bad press today, such as the freak show. Rather than a study of 'other' Victorians and their practices, however, Sweet argues that these are more typical of the Victorian period than hitherto imagined. Attempting to debunk various stereotypes about the period, Sweet suggests

> that Victorian culture was as rich and difficult and complex and pleasurable as our own; that the Victorians shaped our lives and sensibilities in countless unacknowledged ways; that they are still with us, walking our pavements, drinking in our bars, living in our houses, reading our newspapers, inhabiting our bodies. (ibid.: xxiii)

He argues that the Victorians bequeathed to us many cultural features we think of as uniquely ours, such as the theme park and shopping mall, investigative journalism and political spin-doctoring, free education and pornography (ibid.: xi–xii). However, having convincingly established the manifold similarities between Victorian culture and our own, and the ways in which they have undoubtedly shaped us, he goes further, at least rhetorically, to efface any difference altogether. His assertions, above, that the nineteenth century still exists to be explored, and that the Victorians are still with us, which can still, perhaps, be construed as suggesting that there are elements of the Victorian still visible in our otherwise unique culture today, slide into the final, summarising declaration: 'We are the Victorians. We should love them. We should thank them. We should love them' (ibid.: 232). Here the risk of continuism is clear: it tends to suppress otherness just as alteritism suppresses continuities. Effectively, this final statement papers over the textured Victorian period he has offered us throughout the rest of his book. Not only are the Victorians coextensive with ourselves, but our attitude toward an era which, by Sweet's own contention, was multifariously 'good and bad', should be surprisingly homogenous. The diverse and multi-layered identity bestowed upon the Victorian era in the preceding pages dissolves into a conflation of the period with our own. In the process our own, contemporary culture is also flattened and rendered stable, even static. We are the Victorians and we should be singularly grateful to them and even love them.

While urging the necessity of exploring similarity over difference himself, Day ultimately suggests an approach to the past that lies somewhere between the assertion of absolute continuity or the positing of total rupture: 'too great a stress on discontinuity obscures how the past inheres in the present and, if this is not recognised, we are doomed

to repeat it. The task, if we are to move forward instead of marking time, is to understand both continuity and discontinuity' (Day, 1998: 1). This model of history is dependent upon progressive linearity and a didacticism that much contemporary historiography, and, indeed, historical fiction, would contest. However, his suggestion that we should recognise both continuity and discontinuity is useful for exploring other approaches to the relationship between the Victorian past and our present other than positing simple alteritism or continuism, each of which is predicated upon a stable identity for both the Victorians and ourselves. This stable identity does not fully allow for overlaps or restructurations and their impact upon the cultural, political and social features of the present. It glosses over changes such as those generated in and through the media and technology, which produce reconfigured types of public spaces, subjectivities and economic and material realities, and naturalises the processes by which these transformations take place.

William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's cyberpunk novel, *The Difference Engine* (1988), resists this kind of glossing over, or naturalising of, change. An alternative history, it imagines that Charles Babbage's Difference Engine, which was designed but not built in the Victorian era, was in fact completed. In the novel, this early computer is a catalyst for the arrival of the information revolution in the Victorian period, instead of our own. This kind of history, or historical fiction, which explores not what was, but what could plausibly have been, suggests that historical events are contingent, not inevitable. In the case of *The Difference Engine,* it acts as a reminder that the vast technological changes of the late twentieth-century, and their cultural impact, were not 'natural' or inevitable, but the result of processes in which the cultural manifestations and technologies of the Victorian era impacted and were impacted upon by those of the twentieth century, configuring and reconfiguring in new and distorted forms.

This is illustrated further by the fact that in 1991 the Science Museum in London built a machine to Charles Babbage's nineteenth century plans. As Francis Spufford suggests, in doing so, Babbage's machine was given a retrospective history, a place in the history of computer science: 'they possessed the very significant power to name Babbage's enterprise as part of, well, the history of computers, in which his thinking made perfect, retrospective sense' (Spufford, 1996: 268). Part of the problem for Victorian Babbage had been the absence of a language with which to conceptualise and express his ideas, 'he could not refer the intellectual endeavour represented by the Engines to any established context of ideas'. In 1991 the engineers could 'simply refer … to his hardware

and software difficulties' (ibid.: 267–8). When the Science Museum built the Engine, the intervening century had supplied the solutions to these problems and, as Spufford observes, 'supervising the production of several hundred identical metal gears only proved to be interestingly tricky for them' (ibid.: 268). A whole history of computers, of which the Engine is now retrospectively a part, had developed in the meantime and the supporting technologies had become available.

The Difference Engine, as it now stands in the Science Museum, bears tangible witness to the way in which contemporary culture both inhabits and inherits Victorian technologies. Even in computer technology, which seems to epitomise postmodernity, the legacy of the Victorian era, and its continuing influence and impact, is evident. *The Difference Engine* dramatises the impact of technological change, removing it from its familiar context in order to disrupt its seeming naturalness, and suggests certain links between the Victorian period and our own. Yet the Difference Engine is an anachronism, out of place in the Victorian era, because it was not yet built, and not quite belonging to our period either since it was constructed to Victorian plans with technology that is now well outmoded. Rather than imply seamless continuity or smooth evolution between Victorian culture and our own, it is an uncanny presence that somehow produces *both* alterity and recognition.

If alteritism and continuism can be thought to exist on a spectrum of attitudes towards the past, as the excesses at either end, individual neo-Victorian novels can be plotted at various points along the entire spectrum. The contemporary reader might find little continuity between ourselves and the cholera-ridden Victorian period of Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames,* and, conversely, might find little to suggest the Victorian in Emma Tennant's exploration of Hardy's character in *Tess.* Most often, however, these texts contain traces of both alterity and continuism. They produce both the shock of recognition and the fright of estrangement. Thus, as we shall see, A. S. Byatt's *Possession* is predicated upon the assertion of alterity between the Victorian past and our own. This difference is both celebratory and censuring of the era. It generates a lively Victorian intellectual climate for our emulation, while at the same time rendering its failures toward women. At the same time the novel also explores the ways in which Victorian culture continues to have a presence in our own, via the text-as-medium and embodied memory. Although it is structured by nostalgia, the text both advocates and promulgates a critical engagement with the past, and produces a textured portrayal which explores both continuities and discontinuities between Victorian culture and our own. As Michael Pickering and

Emily Keightley suggest, 'nostalgia is not all of a piece' and its functions are complex and even contradictory. They argue that nostalgia can map the present and future in productive ways, that it can signal 'retrieval for the future' as much as 'retreat from the present' and that these two functions are not mutually exclusive. Here, 'nostalgia becomes an action rather than an attitude, showing how the politics of nostalgia are realized in its applications rather than being inherent in the affective phenomenon itself' (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 937). As Jerome De Groot argues, following Pickering and Keightley's reformulation of nostalgia as slippery and mutable, nostalgia has the ability 'to open up multiple spaces for reflection and dissidence'. Looking to the diverse range of practices, objects and media that make up our experience of the historical today, De Groot adds that the value of this multiplicity of engagements lies in its very variance, it ability to 'contain complication, difference, ideology, interrogation, artifice, virtuality, escape and experience' (De Groot, 2009: 250).

Taken together, and alongside the multiple evocations of the 'Victorian' in other media and in a range of practices, the depiction of the era in neo-Victorian fiction does not amount to the attempt to fix a stable identity for the Victorians for emulation or denigration (though it may in individual texts). And the sheer multiplicities of our fascination cannot be simply dismissed as exemplificative of an uncritical reverence for the past. What the prevalence of neo-Victorian novels and their diverse representations primarily suggests is that the Victorians continue to have meaning for us today because we continue to grant them meaning. Indeed, the very contest of meanings attributed to the Victorian era, whether by historians, politicians, entrepreneurs or historical novelists, ensures that the Victorians continue to have (multifarious, contradictory, contested) meaning(s) in our culture. These novels stress the importance of historical recollection itself, of remembering the past in its multiplicity of possible meanings. In unique ways, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, Sarah Waters' *Affinity* and *Fingersmith,* Helen Humphreys' *Afterimage* and Gail Jones' *Sixty Lights* each posit the persistence of the past, and celebrate, promulgate, and give voice to, a continuing desire for cultural memory in an age charged with the inability to think historically.